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ABSTRACT

The relationship between activity and positive self-esteem in girls 9 to 12 years of age was explored in this study. The hypothesis was that the positive relationship between physical activity and positive self-esteem which exists for women also exists for girls. A secondary goal was to gain insight into some of the factors that are associated with both diminished self-esteem and the reasons girls choose to drop out of sports. Data was collected for this study in a focus group format. The girls in each focus group (n=76) were asked to fill out a questionnaire exploring: (1) confidence and perceived competence; (2) levels of activity, sports each girl participated in, reasons for being active and perceived obstacles to physical activity; and (3) career choices and the perceived viability of a chosen career. After completing the questionnaire, girls were engaged in a discussion regarding their views on sports, gym and recess, confidence and risk-taking, and their concerns about becoming teenagers and adults. Findings indicated a positive relationship between self-esteem and physical activity in 9- to 12-year-old girls. Results also showed that there are numerous obstacles preventing girls from being as physically active as they would like to be. The result can be frustration, lack of confidence, and a drop in sports participation. (Contains 14 references and 12 figures.) (TS)

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Girls' Perspectives

Physical Activity and Self-Esteem

Lynn Jaffee and Rebecca Manzer

Introduction

Over the years Melpomene has studied many aspects of women's physical and emotional health. Our attention has now turned to the study of preadolescent and adolescent girls. We chose to focus on girls for two reasons. First, research indicates that over the adolescent years, girls' participation in sports drops sharply (12, 13). Second, research on girls has begun to explore in greater depth the developmental differences between girls and boys (3, 4). One disturbing finding is that as girls move through adolescence and into the teen years, their self-esteem drops dramatically, a drop far more pronounced for them than for boys (11).

At Melpomene, we see a link between these two findings. Having studied the reasons for and benefits of physical activity for women, we are well aware of the relationship between physical activity and positive self-esteem. In each of our membership studies over the past 10 years, women have told us that physical activity enhances self-esteem, reduces stress, promotes a positive body image and makes them feel good about themselves in general (5, 6, 7).

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between activity and positive self-esteem in girls. It was our goal, therefore, to answer the question, "Does the positive relationship between physical activity and positive self-esteem that exists for women exist for girls as well?" Additionally, through our conversations with the girls in this study, we hoped to gain insight into some of the factors that are associated with both diminished self-esteem and the reasons girls choose to drop out of sports.

As the following report details, we found that a positive relationship does exist between self-esteem and physical activity in nine- to 12-year-old girls. We also found, however, that there are numerous obstacles preventing girls from being as physically active as they would like to be. The result can be frustration, lack of confidence and a drop in sports participation.

Review of the Literature

Although research concerning the relationship between sports and self-esteem in girls is minimal, studies have reported the positive effects of physical activity on the mental health of adults. Other research has focused on the declining rate of sports participation in adolescent girls. The following review describes the research that has been carried out in these areas, indicating the need for research on adolescent girls.

A study of 3,000 children between grades four and 10, in 12 locations around the country, was conducted in 1990 by the American Association of University Women (AAUW). Although the study, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging Women* (11), does not examine physical activity, it is important because of its findings on girls and self-esteem. The findings indicate that over the adolescent years, girls' self-esteem drops dramatically. Boys' self-esteem also drops, but not as dramatically as girls.' The study also concludes that the loss of esteem has longer lasting effects for girls.

Melpomene's third membership study, conducted in 1990, consisted of 672 members' responses to an eight-page questionnaire focusing on the obstacles, benefits and trends of participation in physical activity as well as health and lifestyle patterns. When asked about the relationship between physical activity and mental health, 98% of the women who responded said physical activity affected their mental health positively. Thirty-seven percent reported that physical activity reduced stress and promoted relaxation, and 22% said it improved their self-esteem. Further, 40% reported that the mental benefits from physical activty were the best part of being physically active (5).

Dr. Kay Porter, owner of the Eugene, Oregon, sports and organization counseling firm Porter Foster, surveyed 218 of the runners in the 1979 Nike OTC 10K women's race in Eugene (9). Using questionnaires, Porter analyzed the runners' comments about depression, anxiety, relationship satisfaction and safety (fear of attack). More than 90% of the respondents felt that running had increased their positive self-image and made them feel better about their bodies. Eighty percent felt that running helped them deal better with stress. Porter concluded that women can achieve freedom of both body and mind through sports.

The Women's Sports Foundation conducted a study of over 30,000 high school sophomores in 1980. The respondents were subsequently reinterviewed in 1982, 1984 and 1986 to determine the impact of athletic participation on social mobility (14). Through questionnaires, transcript records and school information, the study evaluated the influence of sports participation on high school experiences (i.e., grades, test scores, educational aspirations, extracurricular activities and popularity). They concluded that varsity athletes were more likely than non-athletes to score well on achievement tests, report high popularity, stay in high school (graduate), attend college and seek a bachelor's degree. In addition, they found that Hispanic female athletes were the most likely to benefit from high school

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athletics (i.e., to gain higher academic standing and seek to attend college).

The 1989 Chrysler Fund-Amateur Athletic Union 10-year study reported trends in the physical fitness af America's youth (8). Fitness test scores of 12,000 boys and girls, ages 10 and 17, were drawn yearly from the population of students taking the AAU Fitness Test. In conjunction with the fitness test scores, all participating physical education teachers evaluated children's fitness through questionnaires. Fifty-nine percent of the teachers reported that self-esteem was the primary benefit of physical fitness. Interestingly, only 7% of the teachers reported mental health as the primary objective of their program.

In 1988, the Women's Sports Foundation published the Wilson Report, which reported findings regarding the influence of parents and family factors on girls' participation in sports (13). This report was based on the responses of 1,004 mothers and fathers and 513 of their seven- to 18-year-old daughters who were interviewed by telephone in November and December of 1987. While the participation figures seem high, the report claimed that 87% of girls between the ages of seven and 10 were active in sports and 75% of girls 15 to 18 were active in sports. Forty-one percent of the girls' parents said that building self-confidence and promoting self-discipline and mental health were important benefits of their child's sports involvement.

The Athletic Footwear Association (AFA) described the many benefits of physical activity in its 1991 report, *Fit to Achieve* (2). The Youth Sports Institute of Michigan conducted the study, sponsored by the AFA, in which 10,000 10- to 18-year-olds responded to a questionnaire. Among the potential benefits of physical activity listed by both boys and girls were improved self-confidence and self-esteem, enhanced assertiveness, emotional stability, independence and self-control. The study asserts that physical activity provides an outlet for stress and instills self-worth in children.

The Athletic Footwear Association study reported that sports participation declines dramatically among 13- to 18-year-olds. The report stated that 10-year-olds are much more involved in sports than high school seniors. The problem of adolescents dropping out of sports was analyzed with specific regard to gender in this report. The primary reason for participating in sports cited by boys and girls alike is to have fun. The reasons girls gave for discontinuing involvement in sports were: (1) they lost interest, (2) they were not having fun anymore, (3) there was too much pressure and (4) they needed more study time. The study concluded that because sports are usually geared toward the elite athlete, recreational athletes tended to drop out when it would be most beneficial for them to remain active.

A 1990 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study, the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (12), concluded that only 37% of ninth to 12th graders were vigorously active. The study surveyed 11,631 students in grades nine through 12 in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The students were asked in how many of the preceding 14 days they had had "at least 20 minutes of hard exercise that made you breathe heavily and made your heart beat fast." The study showed that vigorous activity was significantly less common among female students (24.8%) than among male students (49%). The percentage of females reportedly participating in sports decreased significantly from grade nine (30.6%) to grades 11 (23.4%) and 12 (17.3%).

A 1988 task force commissioned by Fitness Canada and the Fitness and Amateur Sport Canada Women's Programme examined the issues, identified the problems and suggested strategies for increasing opportunities for participation in physical activity for young females (1). Their report indicated that by the age of six, boys are noticeably more active than females. Many barriers exist throughout girls' lives, keeping them from continuously participating in sports. These barriers range from parents who perpetuate the stereotype of femininity by associating sports with masculinity, to the lack of encouragement for girls to participate in sports in the school system.

The *National Children and Youth Fitness Study II* (NCYFS II) assessed the physical activity patterns of the first through fourth graders participating in the NCYFS II (10). Through a survey given to the children's parents and teachers, researchers found that participation rates in community-based sports leagues and teams differed greatly between boys and girls at the first grade level and remained consistent through the fourth grade. In first grade, 27.8% of the boys and 10.2% of the girls participated in community sports teams. By the fourth grade, the same percentage difference remained, with 53.1% of the boys and 29.4% of the girls active in community teams.

Over the past 10 years, researchers at Melpomene have documented the benefits of physical activity for adults in the form of increased confidence, decreased stress levels and increased self-esteem (5, 6, 7). Some of the studies mentioned above report that girls are dropping out of sports as they enter their teen years (2, 12). The decline in athletic participation among adolescent girls and the link between physical activity and positive mental health lead us to believe that girls should be encouraged to remain physically active throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

Method

Data was collected for this study in a focus group format. A research team composed of a grade school educator, experts in questionnaire and focus group design, Melpomene research staff and a Melpomene intern were instrumental in designing the focus group and questionnaire format.

The girls in each focus group were asked to fill out a three-page questionnaire

Continued on next page

that consisted of three parts. The first section contained 21 questions about confidence and perceived competence, with a five-point response scale that ranged from "always true" to "always false." This section included questions such as, "I feel proud of the work I do"; "I'm good at sports"; "I like the way I look"; and "I am pretty good at a lot of things."

The sum of these scores became the Melpomene Confidence/Competence Scale. This scale represents a broad measure of self-esteem as well as of feelings of confidence and competence in one's ability in areas such as sports, math, science and school in general. This section of the questionnaire used many of the items and the format style from the AAUW.

With permission of the AAUW, we asked the same questions that the AAUW did so that we could duplicate the AAUW Self-Esteem Index in our study. The AAUW Self-Esteem Index was used as a measure of feelings of self-confidence alone. Figure 1 describes the bases for calculating this index.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on physical activity. It addressed levels of activity, sports each girl participated in, reasons for being active and perceived obstacles to physical activity. The final section of the questionnaire included questions on career choices and the perceived viability of a chosen career.

After completing the questionnaire, the girls were engaged in an hour to hour-and-a-half discussion led by research team facilitators. A recorder from the research team was assigned to take notes on the group discussion. With one exception, the groups agreed to have their discussions audiotaped. The girls discussed their views on sports, gym and recess, confidence and risk-taking and their concerns about becoming teenagers and adults. Immediately after each focus group meeting, the researchers and facilitator met to compare their reactions and impressions.

Tapes and notes from the focus groups were transcribed and coded on the basis of recurring themes, such as sports, relationship to boys in sports, confidence and risk-taking and thoughts and concerns about growing up and personal safety. The quotations that appear in this report are taken directly from the transcribed tapes of focus group discussions.

The girls' responses to open-ended items on the questionnaires were coded, and the overall Melpomene Confidence/Competence Score and the AAUW Self-Esteem Index (Figure 1) were calculated by project staff. The data was then sent to an independent research consultant for statistical analysis.

Simple frequency distributions for each variable were examined. Project staff members worked with the research consultant to create new variables suggested by the data. Because of the importance of obtaining an average physical activity level, a scale was constructed that combined the following items: the number of activities each participant said they engaged in, the number of times per week each participant engaged in these activities and the number of hours per week each participant engaged in these activities. The average, called the "level," was determined by totaling these three variables and dividing by three.

Description of the Sample

Arrangements for the focus groups were made in collaboration with a variety of organizations, such as Girl Scouts, YWCA, community centers and a private school. One group consisted of girls whose mothers had responded to advertisements in local women's publications.

Each group consisted of eight to 15 girls, for a total of 76 girls, ranging in age from nine to 12 years old and in grades four through seven. The girls were from the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. Figure 2 shows age and grade distributions for the study participants.

The average height of the participants was 4' 9," and the average weight was 78 pounds. While the entire questionnaire was a self-report format, the height and weight section seemed to be the most problematic for the respondents. It appeared that some girls guessed on these two items, and others reported measurements that might have been taken several months earlier. A number of girls left these two questions blank. (Height: 17 missing; weight: eight missing).

Attention was given to gathering a group of girls who were geographically, economically and racially diverse. As Figure 3 shows, 48% of the participants were white, 18% were African American, 7% were of mixed descent or biracial and 3% were Asian.

AAUW Self-Esteem Index

The AAUW Self-Esteem Index was figured by using the following items:

1. I like most things about myself.
2. I like the way I look.
3. I wish I were somebody else.
4. I'm happy the way I am.
5. Sometimes I don't like myself that much.

A value of +2 was assigned to "always true" responses, +1 to "sort of true," 0 to "sometimes true/sometimes false," -1 to "sort of false," and -2 to "always false." For negative questions, these values were reversed.

To arrive at the index value, the value for each of the five questions was summed. For analysis purposes a constant was added to eliminate negative numbers.

Greenberg Lake Associates for AAUW chose the five questions above by running a factor analysis on the entire battery of questions in their study, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*. It used the five questions that exhibited the most variance, with the exception of the statement "I like the way I look," which showed a wide variance for girls but not for boys.

For further information contact the American Association of University Women, 515 Second Street N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002. Phone: (202) 547-5200.

Figure 1

Results

Self-Esteem and Physical Activity

One hundred percent of the girls reported exercising regularly, and 100% of the girls reported that they enjoyed physical activity. As shown in Figure 4, 60% of the girls said they were active at least four to six times per week.

Figure 5 illustrates the wide variety of activities in which the participants said they engaged. This high level of physical activity might be attributed to both the recruitment and selection of focus groups members, most of whom were participants in organizations that incorporated physical activity into their programs. Also, the acknowledged focus of Melpomene's work might have influenced the girls' responses.

The average AAUW Self-Esteem Index Score for the girls in this study was 3.32. This score falls between the 3.93 score for elementary school girls and the 2.8 score for middle school girls presented in the landmark report *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (11). The AAUW study indicates that girls' self-esteem levels drop throughout the adolescent years, with high school girls bottoming out with a Self-Esteem Index score of 2.77. It is important to note that the score of 3.32 found in our study closely follows these trends, as the participants in our study were a combination of late elementary and early middle school aged girls. Figure 6 illustrates this point.

Age & Grade Distribution of Participants

Age	No.	%
9	19	25.0
10	22	28.9
11	21	27.6
12	14	18.4

Grade*	No.	%
4	21	27.6
5	22	28.9
6	28	36.8
7	5	6.6

*Entering into (after summer break) or currently enrolled in

Relative frequencies are reported in this and all subsequent figures.

Figure 2

Racial Identities of Participants

Racial Identity	No.	%
White	48	63.2
African American	18	23.7
Mixed/Biracial	7	9.2
Asian	3	3.9

Figure 3

The mean score of the Confidence/Competence Scale was 84.7, about midway within a range of 66 to 102. A low score on this scale indicated lower levels of confidence and perceived competence, and a high score indicated higher levels. As is shown in Figure 7, the Confidence/Competence Scale and the Self-Esteem Index were both highly variable when those scores were grouped by racial identity and by grade.

The relationship between the Confidence/Competence Scale and the Self-Esteem Index was strong and positive ($R=.36$; $p \leq .001$). While we cannot be assured that the two scales measure different personal qualities, the Self-Esteem Index was used as a measure of feelings of self-confidence alone, and the broader Confidence/Competence Scale was used as a measure of feelings of confidence in oneself, competence in one's abilities in a variety of areas and self-esteem.

Although not a statistically significant finding, participants who spent more time per week participating in physical activity or sports scored higher on the Self-Esteem Index. None of the other comparisons between participation levels and self-esteem and confidence/competence yielded this same result. In all cases, however, those girls who participated in activities at the highest levels also scored highest on the Confidence/Competence Score and the Self-Esteem Index. Figure 8 shows data comparing participation rates (number of times per week engaged in physical activity) and Self-Esteem Index scores.

An unexpected but important finding was that the mean participation rates for girls in the highest Confidence/Competence score group were higher than those with lower Confidence/Competence scores. This means that those girls who felt most confident about themselves and their abilities were more likely to participate in physical activities at higher levels than girls who felt less confident.

For purposes of this analysis, the scores on the Confidence/Competence Scale were broken into thirds, with the lowest third comprised of scores ranging from 66 to 79 (N=23), the middle third of scores ranging from 80 to 87 (N=27) and the highest third of scores ranging from 88 to 102 (N=26). As indicated in Figure 9, the differences among the groups in overall physical activity and the number of activities cited were statistically significant.

Conversations with the girls in the focus groups revealed that there was a positive relationship between competence or ability in a sport and the confidence to play without reservation. For example,

Frequency of Physical Activity

Times/Week	No.	%
One or less	8	10.5
2-3 times	22	28.9
4-6 times	27	35.5
7 or more times	19	25.0

Hours/Week	No.	%
Less than 2	12	16.0
2 to less than 4	17	22.7
4 to less than 7	23	30.7
7 or more	23	30.7

Figure 4

Continued on next page

one girl said, "I feel comfortable playing any sport that I'm pretty good at." Other girls expressed their good feelings about their abilities in different ways. One girl said, "I feel confident about myself in stuff that I'm really good at and when there's another team that we're playing and they're really good." Another said, "I'm pretty confident about myself when I do something good. When I get a good time, I like to tell everybody." Another girl reported, "I'm confident when I'm playing basketball. I try to do things I may not be able to do."

Risk-taking

The girls in this study also said that for the most part they would take a risk or try something new. This kind of confidence — the willingness to take a risk — was expressed in a variety of ways and took many forms. For some girls, it was playing on a new team or trying a new sport. One girl said, "When I started hockey, I didn't know how to skate. I know how to figure skate a little bit, but I didn't know the rules or anything, and on my first day it was just boys over there, and I didn't even know how to stop or go backwards or anything." Another girl talked about risk and achievement: "Two summers ago I swam in a club. I was at the bottom of the age group, and this year I was at the top, and so then my coach wanted me to swim the butterfly. I swam it and I got second out of 14, so well, I kind of tried it."

Sports achievement was not the only arena in which these girls were willing to take risks. Many took risks in other areas of their lives. For example, one girl said, "The first time I gave a speech, I was really scared. Now I've given lots of speeches and it doesn't really bother me at all. I just get up there and do it."

Many girls said they liked the challenge of trying something new or risky, and talked of missing chances if they didn't take a risk. The girls expressed these feelings in a variety of ways. Statements made by the girls included: "I like challenging myself." "If you didn't try, you wouldn't know if you were good at it." "It might be the only chance. There might not be any other chances to try it." One girl said, "I'm almost always confident and I don't let things get to me that make me slow down. I knew a person who was on one of my teams. She just wouldn't try at all. I learned from her. I said that I didn't want it happening to me. So I don't let those things get to me. I am always confident, and when I get bad scores, I know I did the best I could. That's good enough for me."

The girls in this study described themselves as willing to take risks, yet there were some instances in which they might not take a risk. Many said that if a risk felt too scary or if they might get hurt, they would not try something new. One girl said, "If it was something like climbing and I try it, I might get myself hurt." Another described her hesitation in this way: "It depends on what it is. If it's something that I know is going to be scary and that other people think is really scary even after they've done it, then I probably won't do it, because I don't like things that are really going to scare me and aren't going to be that fun, even if I do it."

A few girls said that they would not try something or take a risk if it meant that they might get into trouble. One girl said that she would never try to be in a gang and another said they she would not try to sneak into a party.

The study participants reported being most confident and most willing to take risks in certain settings. Informal circumstances among friends, with family members or within their neighborhood were situations that girls cited as the ones where they were most willing and most comfortable being active. For example, one girl said, "About being comfortable, it depends on the people, because if I play with the girls around our table it would be really easy for me. I mean, if I missed the ball when we were playing baseball it wouldn't matter." Other girls expressed their willingness to play around family members. One said, "I don't mind playing with my cousins and stuff because I know if I make a mistake it's not like they're going to say, 'Oh, you always do that.'" Another said, "I'm comfortable playing games with my brother's friends, but I'm not really comfortable playing games out in the field."

Awareness of the possibility of making mistakes and being criticized is an important indicator of whether a girl will be confident enough to take a risk. One girl expressed this in the following way: "Sure, I would try something new. I think that it's because I trust my friends a lot. I'll go out and I'll do things that I've never done before just because I know that my friends won't laugh at me, and I can say something and I trust them enough not to laugh at me." Another girl talked about her frustration: "I used to play on a T-ball team and someone on the team made fun of me. I didn't really know how to play and I just signed up because I wanted to learn how and so I quit. I guess I wish I would have stayed on because I play softball and I think I could be better."

Effects of Boys

Many girls reported that they were not confident and were greatly inhibited by having to play in a less formal setting with boys who were not family members or neighborhood friends. In these settings, such as physical education classes, school teams or extracurricular sports, girls

Physical Activities Engaged in

Activity	No.	%
Swim	54	71.1
Bike	49	64.5
Basketball	35	46.1
Softball/baseball	32	42.1
Run	30	39.5
Soccer/kickball	30	39.5
Dance	22	28.9
Other	20	26.3
Tennis	18	23.7
Gymnastics	14	18.4
Skating, etc.	14	18.4
Walking	12	15.8
Skiing	10	13.2
Musical instrument	9	11.8
Bowling	8	10.5
Jump rope	5	6.6
Canoeing, etc.	4	5.3
Exercise machines	3	3.9
Volleyball	2	2.6

Figure 5

expressed a fear of being criticized by the boys with whom they were playing. For example, one girl reported, "When I play with the boys, if you miss the ball they'll start kind of yelling at you and they get mad at you. So it makes me uncomfortable to play with them when they do that." Another said, "Well, sometimes I like playing sports, but there's someone I don't like and he's criticizing me all the time and saying, 'Oh, you can't do that.' And he's always stealing my ball and stuff, so I just put my ball away."

Criticism from boys was not the only deterrent to sports participation. Girls also reported that boys take control of various games in such a way that it limits girls' participation and delivers the message that the girls are not equal players. One girl explained, "They'll never give it to us, like the ball in football, so we end up just wasting our recess or gym period kind of standing there. Then they'll have to throw it to us and they'll throw it as gently as they can so that we'll catch it. They don't think that we can do it. Me and a couple of people were playing kickball with the boys. We came in in the middle of the game and they always put us at the back of the kicking order. When we got up they would order us exactly where to kick it and how fast to run. But I didn't even get to get up usually because they'd put me at the end of the line each time and so I wouldn't have time to get up because they'd strike out." Another girl simply said, "They pick us last." A third girl described her experience by saying, "I like playing outside, but some of the boys are ball hogs. I was almost going to quit and I was crying yesterday because I spent the whole recess just sitting out on the gym floor saying, 'Hey, I'm open,' and no one would pass it to me. They just think they're the best and they just take the ball down the court and they score and everything. It's like, great, I'm glad you scored, but there's no point to me being here, so. . . ."

Under these circumstances, girls begin to question their ability in sports, and as a result, their self-esteem suffers. One girl talked about her feelings when the boys take over in this way: "Sometimes the boys don't want to give you the ball and you feel like, 'Am I doing something wrong?' But probably they just don't want to give me the ball because I'm bad. . . ."

Inequitable Treatment

Many girls talked about different treatment from their physical education teachers that reinforced the idea that girls were not equal to the boys. This reinforcement came in a number of ways. The girls said that their teachers would deliver the message that the girls needed help. For example, one girl said, "If we're playing boys against girls, he (the teacher) always goes on the girls' team and then we all say, 'Don't be on our team.' And then, if we're tied 0 to 0 he comes in to help us."

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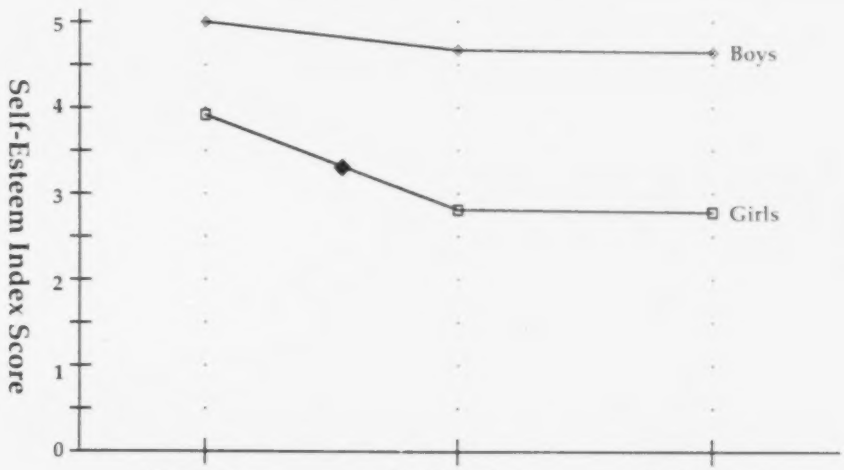
A Comparison of AAUW Self-Esteem Index Results and Melpomene's Results



	Elementary	Middle School	High School
Boys	4.99	4.68	4.65
Girls	3.93	2.80	2.77

◆ Melpomene's results from girls nine- to 12-years-old = 3.32.

Figure 6

Another girl explained, "There's a teacher who is just really sexist and he picks the boys. He thinks that boys are better, but any one of us (the girls) can do just as well as the boys. He shows off everything, he goes around dribbling, making long shots and it's like he's the master and that the boys come after him and then come the girls, like we're the last."

Some of the girls in this study also complained that their gym teachers favored those students who showed greater ability; those students were most often boys. This favoritism not only discouraged those who were not "star" athletes but limited the opportunities for those of lesser ability to improve. One girl expressed her frustration in the following conversation with the interviewer. Girl: "I think what is not fun about physical education is that the people who are good get more attention and they get to stay the best, but the people who are still trying to do a good job are totally ignored. They say, 'She's better, so we're going to let her do it' or 'We're going to let her have the chance.'" Interviewer: "So it makes it hard for people to get better?" Girl: "But the people who are just as good, they have to sit behind and they can't do as well and they don't have the chance to improve."

Confidence/Competence Score and Self-Esteem Index by Racial Identity and Grade

Racial Identity	No.	Confidence/ Competence Score	Self-Esteem Index
Asian	3	99.33	2.33
African American	18	81.39	3.88
White	48	85.58	3.31
Biracial	7	84.43	2.43

Grade	No.	Confidence/ Competence Score	Self-Esteem Index
4	20	81.76	3.00
5	22	86.73	3.68
6	28	85.82	3.54
7	5	82.00	1.80

Figure 7

Physical Activity Level and Self-Esteem Index

Physical Activity Participation Times Per Week	No.	Self-Esteem Index
Less than 1 time/week	1	0.00
1 time/week	6	2.33
2-3 times/week	22	2.73
4-6 times/week	27	3.56
7 or more times/week	19	4.16

Figure 8

In addition to physical education teachers favoring those with better ability, the girls in this study also felt that because they were girls they were often overlooked as good athletes. One girl said, "I think that the gym teachers don't care. The boys are very athletic and we're just a bunch of little . . . girls . . . and it's not true. You should see some of us in . . . . We're there and we're getting in all these piles trying to get the tennis ball. I wish sometimes the gym teacher would come see us when we aren't being pressured into doing stuff. When we're doing stuff for fun we do it a lot better."

Girls in every focus group mentioned that they chased and were chased by boys, with a certain amount of roughness involved from both sexes. The girls seemed divided as to whether they liked this. One girl said, "At recess the boys chase the girls, and I don't like that." In an exchange, the interviewer asked, "What do you do at recess that you like?" The girl responded, "We beat up on the boys."

Another girl told the interviewers that at her school the boys and the girls had been split up because they were chasing each other.

Some girls said that they did not like forced "social" interaction with the boys in physical education classes. This was especially clear when the girls spoke about a square dancing unit they had in physical education. One girl said, "I ended up with this one boy and he was swinging me around. I was his partner a lot, and he was always showing off."

Another reaction on the girls' part was discomfort at having to acknowledge boys as someone other than playmates. One girl spoke of that discomfort in this way: "We square dance and they (the teachers) go, 'Why don't you pick a partner?' and I don't think any of us wants to go out and pick a partner." Other girls in the focus groups simply said that square dancing was their least favorite unit in physical education.

Competition

The girls in some of the focus groups spoke about competition in physical education classes. For the most part, the girls did not like fitness testing because of the competitive nature of the testing. One girl said, "Fitness testing gets really competitive, and everyone's competing to

Confidence/Competence Scale and Physical Activity Levels/ No. of Activities

Confidence/ Competence Score	Mean "Level" for Group	No.
Lowest 1/3 — 66-79	3.80	23
Middle 1/3 — 80-87	3.84	27
Highest 1/3 — 88-102	4.61	26

Mean level for total sample was 4.09, with range of 1.33 to 7.33.
Significance: $p \leq .0406$.

Confidence/ Competence Score	Mean No. of Physical Activities	No.
Lowest 1/3 - 66-79	4.52	23
Middle 1/3 - 80-87	4.07	27
Highest 1/3 - 88-102	6.04	26

Significance: $p \leq .0214$.

Figure 9

be the best. If you don't do your best and if you don't do really well, you're put down because other people are expecting you to do well." Another said, "I'm really against fitness testing because I think that it's way too competitive. I was doing the arm hang and he (the teacher) said, 'Oh, come on, you have to beat this time; otherwise, everyone will look down on you.' So I just fell down, and he said, 'That's such a terrible time, you weren't even close to beating last year's.' I just said, 'I don't care.'"

The competitive setting that girls liked was a unit called "tasks," mentioned by girls from three focus groups from the same school. Tasks involved splitting the students into small groups to complete some challenge as a group. The girls that mentioned this unit liked the challenge and did not mind the competition, because they were competing as a group. For example, one girl said, "We have this thing called tasks where we have all these different obstacle things and it's not really competing because you have a team and we go around and see how many points you can get."

Obstacles to Physical Activity

Obstacles	No.	%
Conflict with other activities	23	30.2
Physical limitations	15	19.7
Lack of motivation or fatigue	15	19.7
Nothing	10	13.1
Low confidence in ability	7	9.2
Child care	6	7.9
Environment/ equipment difficulties	6	7.9
Other	6	7.9
No ride	5	6.6
Chores	3	3.9
Difficulty with skill	2	2.6
No playmate	2	2.6
Left blank	5	6.6

Figure 10

Obstacles to Physical Activity

While gender differences were cited in the focus group setting as one of the greatest obstacles to girls' physical activity, the girls responses on the questionnaires revealed a different picture. In response to the question, "What makes it hard for you to be physically active?" almost one-third (30.2%) of the girls responding said that conflict with other activities was the greatest obstacle to physical activity (Figure 10).

In the focus groups, some girls talked about time conflicts and said they found it hard to balance sports, school work and other activities. One girl summed up her busy life in this way: "Right when I get home I have to go to dance and then I have to come home and eat. Then on piano days I have to come home and get my piano books and then go, and on drama days I have to stay after school and then when I get home I have to eat. Then I have to do homework and go to bed. My friends say, 'But you never can play.' And then I do 4H, and I'm vice president and secretary, so I'm not going to have very much playing time."

Physical limitations, such as health problems or injuries, were mentioned on the questionnaire by 19.7% of the girls as an obstacle to activity. One girl wrote, "I have asthma, so if I play soccer I have to sit out sometimes during the game, but I wish I could play." Another girl wrote, "I get side aches if I do something too long." Some girls also worried about injuries. One wrote, "I'm afraid of getting hurt from several earlier experiences." Another said simply, "I might get hurt."

Lack of motivation or fatigue was cited by 19.7% of the girls as a factor keeping them from being as active as they would like to be. Girls wrote about this in different ways. One said, "I get bored with tennis and sometimes don't want to go." Another said, "I get really tired and low on energy."

On the questionnaire, girls cited obstacles to physical activity that were primarily internal. They reported being too busy, having time conflicts, having physical limitations and being tired or not motivated. In contrast, it was only in the focus group format that the girls' frustrations about barriers due to gender were voiced. This difference between data collected from a questionnaire and information gathered in a focus group may be due to a number of factors. The girls may have felt that a setting with other girls was a safe place to voice their frustrations. Perhaps after one girl spoke of her experiences, other girls were willing to voice similar experiences. Finally, it is possible that it was difficult for the girls to write about gender-based barriers in a questionnaire format.

Motivators for Physical Activity

The questionnaires also asked, "Why are you active?" As shown in Figure 11, 76.3% of the girls said that "fun" was the motivator for activity. Twenty-six percent of the girls answered by saying that they were active for the health and physical benefits. For example, girls wrote, "It's fun and I get exercise." "It gets you in shape." "It's good for your health."

The focus groups also revealed that the primary motivator for girls to be physically active is fun. Part of what made

Reasons to be Physically Active

Reason	No.	%
Fun	58	76.3
Health/ physical benefits	20	26.3
Something to do	7	9.2
Parents want me to	6	7.9
Learn skill, future	5	6.6
Make new friends	5	6.6
Challenge/goals	4	5.3
School	3	3.9
Want to	3	3.9
Mental benefit	1	1.3
Other	1	1.3
Left blank	2	2.6

Figure 11

Continued on next page

an activity fun for the girls was an appropriate level of challenge. The idea of fun and challenge was voiced in a variety of different ways. For example, one girl said, "I like physical education when we play games that are athletic, like the games you usually play in gym, like capture the flag." Another said, "When we play a game, we're running harder because you want to get . . . you're having fun. So, I wish we'd play more games and not just exercise. Also, I like "tasks" because it's fun."

The girls in the focus groups also liked the challenge of learning new sports. For example, when asked about the activities that they currently engaged in, some girls mentioned sports that they would like to learn. One girl said, "I like to listen to the radio and I like to swim, play tennis, and I don't know how to ski, but I'd like to know." Another girl voiced her desire to learn a new activity in a different way: "I play softball, too, and I also like to dance by myself. I can't take any of those classes because my parents can't really afford it, but I taught myself some stuff and watch my friends."

Appropriate levels of challenge were important to the girls. The girls clearly did not like activities that were either too hard and demanding or too easy. One girl said of her gym class, "We can play fun games, but they bring up fun games that we're going to play and then make them like first grade games. Like, we play volleyball, except we play with beach balls."

The girls spoke more often about not liking activities that were too hard or being pushed too hard in general. About being pushed, one girl said, "I like the (fitness) tests, but then they make you run a mile in a certain amount of minutes and stuff. I don't like that because then it just pushes you too hard. If you don't feel very good or anything they still make you do it. I don't really like that though. I kind of like the rest of the tests." Another said, "Fitness testing is very competitive, and they don't let anyone stop even if they have problems." Another girl talked about her frustrations with physical education being too challenging and the lack of instruction: "I like physical education, but it's kind of confusing. They don't explain everything and then half the class knows what to do and then you don't and then they just go, 'Oh, half the class knows how to do this, so, we'll just play and you guys catch up.' You don't even know what the game is."

Encouragement is an integral part of keeping both girls and boys active in sports. The questionnaires asked the girls who encourages them to be physically active. As shown in Figure 12, the most common response to this question was "myself" (84.2%), indicating that the majority of girls in this study were self-motivated. The second most commonly mentioned sources of motivation were parents, with mother being cited by 76.3% of the girls and father by 57.9% of the girls. Friends were also cited by 57.9% of the girls.

It is interesting that most of the girls motivated themselves, despite the numerous obstacles and frustrations that they talked about. Further, many of the girls in this study were aware that the option to make a future living in sports was not as likely to be available to them as it would be for boys. The opportunity to play professional sports, a motivator for boys, is not a factor cited by girls as a reason to be physically active. In fact, the girls talked about their frustration at the lack of opportunity to play professional sports as adults. One girl said, "Sometimes when you get older and you still like sports a lot, if you wanted to do it like in professional stuff, there's not a lot for women." Another said, "When you get older sometimes, since there's not a lot of opportunities in sports, you can't earn a lot of money, so you have to get a job and when you get a job there's not really any time for sports."

Other girls in the study talked about the lack of opportunities that they currently faced. One girl summed up her feelings of unfairness in this way: "Some girls like to play hockey and they say, 'No, it's not a girl's sport. You're just going to get knocked over by all the guys.' And then the girl scores all the goals and they don't think anything of it. And I've seen a whole bunch of men just do all the sports and everything and I never see really anything for girls except for gymnastics, and boys are in that. I think that girls should be able to be in boys' sports, because gymnastics, they say it's mostly for girls, but you see boys in gymnastics. Then why don't you see girls in football and hockey? Some girls want to play it and they just don't get to."

Responses to the Question, "Who encourages you to be physically active?"

Who	No.	%
Myself	64	84.2
Mother	58	76.3
Father	44	57.9
Friend	44	57.9
Sibling	30	39.5
Coach	29	38.1
Teacher	27	35.5
Organization	22	28.9
Other	16	21.1
Doctor	7	9.2
No one	6	7.9

Figure 12

Conclusions

Based on data gathered from both the questionnaire and focus group discussions, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- The girls in this study were physically active in a variety of sports.
- All of the girls in the study reported enjoying the activities in which they participated.
- The primary reason girls engaged in physical activity was to have fun, followed by positive health benefits.
- Those girls who felt most confident about themselves and their abilities were more likely to participate in physical activities at higher levels than girls who felt less confident.
- The girls in this study derived positive self-esteem from sports through challenge, achievement in sports, risk-taking experiences and skill development.

- The girls in this study were motivated to be physically active by: 1) themselves, 2) their mothers, 3) their fathers and their friends.
- Despite having fun, liking physical activity, and feeling good about themselves, the girls in this study cited some serious obstacles to maintaining physical activity. These obstacles included unfair treatment by the boys they were playing with, the assumption that they were not good players, inappropriate level of challenge, lack of opportunity and time conflicts with other activities.

It is important that those adults who work with girls in this age group focus on removing these obstacles, as they and the frustrations cited by the girls will become the reasons that girls drop from sports participation. It is also important for younger girls to develop the skills necessary to participate in sports with confidence in themselves and their abilities. Some strategies for parents, teachers, coaches and recreation specialists might include:

- Encourage same-sex teams, where girls can play and try new activities in a safe, uncritical environment.
- Keep organized sports fun, ensuring appropriate levels of challenge for each child, taking into account each girl's skill level.
- Competitiveness should be kept to a minimum, as competition is not a primary reason for girls to participate in sports. Girls are more likely to continue participating when the focus is on self-esteem, skill building and teamwork.
- Provide opportunities for girls in all kinds of sports, including traditional male sports, such as football and hockey. Opportunities should be provided for girls of all skill levels. Equipment must be provided by the sponsoring agency to ensure that girls' participation will not be limited by finances.
- Emphasize women role models who are active in sports, such as coaches and collegiate, Olympic and professional athletes. Encourage girls to become active and vocal in increasing opportunities for girls and women. ●

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